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The Menace of the Gull

It is high time that the excessive damage to nesting birds due to the great increase of the larger gulls in North America should be recognized and measures undertaken to control their depredations before other birds besides the Murres on the Farallon Islands become exterminated.

All large gulls, with the exception of the Glaucous-winged, as well as Skuas and Jaegers, are ruthless predators during the nesting season. The absolute protection afforded them in North America under the Migratory Bird Act has resulted in a huge increase in their numbers and especially in their nesting colonies on the Atlantic coast.

Much might be said regarding the destruction by the Greater Black-backed Gull and the Herring Gull, but the intention of this article is to emphasize the menace in California and the Pacific States of the two commonest species in this region, the Western and California Gulls.

The destruction wrought by the Western Gull on the Farallons is well known and if combatted in time would have saved the fine colony of California Murres there. An account of the havoc wrought may be found in Dawson's "Birds of California" based upon visits to the islands in 1911 and subsequent years. About twenty years later the Murres were reduced to about fifteen pairs, which were only able to carry on by laying their eggs far back under overhanging rocks. The latest record reports only one young bird to be found after a survey of rocks that used to support a colony of many thousands of birds. And the destruction is laid altogether to the killing of the birds by crude oil!

Now in British Columbia during the same period the California Murre has increased prodigiously. Prior to 1920 or thereabouts both eggs and birds were much sought after by Indians. The birds were taken in large numbers for food at the time of the spring herring runs. At the present day they are comparatively unmolested and are by long odds our commonest *Alcid*. This increase has been very apparent to the writer on many cruises on the Gulf of Georgia from 1890 onward.

The Murre is by far the commonest victim to crude oil on these waters as it is in California, but we have no Western Gulls, except as stragglers from their breeding grounds to the south of the International boundary. Our only nesting gull in this region is the Glaucous-winged — the only large gull with a decent reputation.

Bad as the case is against the Western Gull, the California Gull has still more to answer for and if uncontrolled will eventually cause the extermination of two of the most interesting denizens of the beaches of California, the Snowy Plover and Least Tern. Already a number of localities once used for nesting by these birds are tenantless and the latter species is actually now in a precarious position.

An actual example of the destruction was afforded by a visit to the fine stretch of beach near the mouth of the Salinas River by O. P. Silliman, James

Moffitt and the writer on May 23, 1933. Here was one of the last stands of the Least Tern along the long seaboard of California. There were probably fifteen or twenty pairs, four newly-laid eggs (singles) only were seen; each was probably only laid within the last hour and, from the evidence of the many empty nests with the tracks of gulls leading to them, they too would disappear within another hour.

Snowy and Killdeer Plovers were also nesting in numbers; even at this late date (both species lay in March) not a single young one was to be seen along the miles of sand dunes. A few nests with eggs were found; far more were empty, with gull tracks at each to show how the eggs had gone.

A large colony of Forster Terns were crowded together on a grassy point; these were able to protect their eggs by the sheer force of numbers that mobbed every encroaching gull. But the Least Terns and the plovers would, in all probability, never raise a single young one, all due to the presence of a large body of non-breeding gulls, chiefly California Gulls.

A similar collection of gulls of this species dominated a nesting colony of White Pelicans and Caspian Terns on Buena Vista Lake in April and May, 1923. Mr. A. Van Rossem and myself made several visits to the island upon which these birds were nesting. Nothing but broken eggshells of both Pelican's and Tern's eggs were to be seen up to 26 May.

Other writers have published records of similar destruction at nesting colonies by California Gulls and the condition exists throughout the nesting range of this species in California, Nevada and Utah, north to Alberta and Saskatchewan. The late Dr. E. W. Nelson when Chief of the Biological Survey in a long conversation with the writer in 1920 recognized the importance of dealing with the increasing menace of the larger gulls.

This menace is also recognized in the Old World. In the British Isles gulls are allowed to be shot over a long open season from August until March. Their eggs are taken and sold on the markets, especially since the protection has been accorded the Lapwing, which, until a recent date, afforded the "plover's eggs" to epicures. And yet no species of gull there is in any danger or shows any noticeable decrease.

No one wants to see the extermination of any gull, even if such a thing was possible, but how much longer are we to tolerate the devastation of our shore and water birds, especially of the smaller species of the gull-tribe, by the larger gulls and jaegers? By all means afford them complete protection in all our harbors where their value as scavengers is obvious. But let us recognize that their presence in the vicinity of the nesting places of most of our shore and water birds, without any control, is fraught with the most imminent danger to the perpetuation of some of our bird-species.

As Althea Sherman pungently observes, "what is wanted in America is a society to protect wild-life from the Protectionists."

Allan Brooks, Okanagan Landing, B. C. 7 April, 1937.



Why I Killed a Sharp-shinned Hawk

In the course of reporting a few casual observations on nesting Sharp-shinned Hawks in THE GULL, August, 1935, I mentioned having killed a male bird beginning his nesting activities in the Oakland Boy Scout Camp. That article provoked considerable comment. Several prominent ornithologists criticized my action on the ground that it tended to disturb nature's balance, as well as destroyed an opportunity for valuable study. To date I have failed to defend myself, but, at this time I wish to sum up the arguments presented by my critics and attempt to refute them.

My friends pointed out that I should have availed myself of the opportunity offered to study a pair of hawks which were just beginning to nest, as comparatively little has been done with nesting Sharp-shinned Hawks. This point I must

concede to them in principle, but in this case conditions were different as the nest was being constructed only a few feet from the bird-banding station in the camp sanctuary.

They also pointed out that this would have been a golden opportunity to demonstrate to the boys just how nature really works; how these hawks hunt by stealth in contrast to the soaring varieties: how they dart swiftly through the trees, suddenly swooping upon their prey. Much, it is true, could have been accomplished by studying and observing their activities and their relation to the other birds, yet I feel that the resultant scarcity of bird life would not justify their presence. Not only would the banding be hindered and the bird population decreased, but those surviving would be a harassed and frightened group, and therefore difficult to study.

It has been my experience, and the experience of those with whom I have discussed this subject, that children being introduced to bird-lore are much more aroused and stimulated by seeing varieties of birds under favorable conditions than by learning one of nature's principles.

My critics also pointed out that the hawk tends to improve wild stock by weeding out the injured and unfit birds first, which is, in fact, a favor to the injured bird. Scientific study of starvation testifies that sudden death to these incapacitated birds is humane. But after watching a family of quail reduced day to day from eighteen to five and on two occasions actually seeing the hawk kill the young quail, it is difficult to remain passive. On numerous occasions I observed the hawk in the vicinity of these quail apparently trailing this particular family group.

At another time a Northern Phalarope resting on the camp's swimming pool was discovered by this hawk and chased through the trees, darting here and there, until it was finally overtaken and struck to the earth. Another example of an able-bodied bird being destroyed.

Another point was that the hawk tends to maintain the balance of nature by reducing an excessive number of certain birds, which is a natural principle. Unquestionably there are more birds hatched every year than can find suitable habitat and livelihood, but in this particular instance we have created unnatural conditions intentionally. In this sanctuary birds are fed and protected, and therefore congregate in excess of the numbers that could normally live in such a restricted area.

In conclusion, therefore, I vindicate my action on the grounds that it dealt with a special case, as outlined, and that the usual theory of conservation is not applicable.

Robert E. Taylor, Oakland, California.



August field trip was taken on Sunday, the 15th, to Tennessee Cove, Marin County. It was a cold, foggy day with a strong wind blowing. Birds were few and far between. The list for the day was forty-five, as follows:

Brown Pelican	Allen Hummingbird	Western Gnatcatcher
Brandt Cormorant	Belted Kingfisher	Lutescent Warbler
Turkey Vulture	Red-shafted Flicker	Pileolated Warbler
Cooper Hawk	Western Flycatcher	English Sparrow
Red-tailed Hawk	Barn Swallow	San Francisco Red-wing
Sparrow Hawk	Coast Jay	Black-headed Grosbeak
Killdeer	Nicasio Jay	House Finch
Hudsonian Curlew 25	Raven	Willow Goldfinch
Long-billed Dowitcher 1	Crow	Green-backed Goldfinch
Western Sandpiper 6	Nicasio Chickadee	San Francisco Towhee
Northern Phalarope 1	Coast Bush-tit	S. F. Brown Towhee
Western Gull	Ruddy Wren-tit	Lark Sparrow
California Gull	House Wren	Junco
Mourning Dove	Nicasio Wren	Nuttall Sparrow
Anna Hummingbird	Western Bluebird	Song Sparrow

Members attending were: Mr. and Mrs. Stephens; Mesdames Courtright, Kelly, Saunders; Misses Cohen, Collins, Conant, Danz, MacIver, Papina; Messrs. Jencks, Myer, Power, Thomas; Dr. Mirick; Master Harold Kirker, with two guests, Mesdames Anabel and Jencks.



Audubon Notes

September Meeting: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday, the 16th, at 8 p.m., room 19, Ferry Building.

The speakers will be Harold Twinning, on "Some Observations on the Sierra Nevada Rosy Finch," and Elmer C. Aldrich, on "The Effect of a Recent Oil Pollution on Water Birds in the San Francisco Coast Area."



September Field Trip will be taken on Sunday, the 19th, to the shore at Alameda. San Francisco members take 9:45 a. m. Alameda Ferry and Encinal Avenue train to High Street south, where party will meet. East Bay members take bus in Oakland at 14th and Broadway to High Street and Encinal Avenue.



August Meeting: The 240th regular meeting was held on the 12th, in room 19, Ferry Building, with thirty members and guests present. President Junea W. Kelly presided.

Miss Margaret H. Collins of San Francisco was elected to membership.



Observations: Mrs. Kelly, August 5th, Dumbarton Bridge, 1000+ Northern Phalaropes, one Red-backed Sandpiper; 17th, North Lake, Golden Gate Park, Red Phalarope.

Commander Parmenter: June 24th,

Lake Merced, a nest of a Western Grebe; on July 23rd, the adult bird was seen with one young which it was teaching to dive, after which the parent bird took the chick on its back and swam into the tules. June 12th, from Cliff House to Martin's Beach, Shearwaters in numbers with the greatest number on July 12th. July 15th, Alvarado marsh, eight adult Avocets and two downy young; San Mateo Bridge, Northern Phalaropes about 50 increasing to over 1000 on July 25th; 17th, Cliff House, four Surf-birds, 23rd, two Black Turnstones, six California Gulls, August 2nd, one Wandering Tattler; July 15th, San Mateo Bridge, one Black-bellied Plover, one Ruddy Turnstone, four Hudsonian Curlew, $50 \pm$ Least Sandpipers, twenty Long-billed Dowitcher, twelve Forster Terns; 25th, two American Golden-eyes and $30 \pm$ Least Terns; 15th, Dumbarton Bridge, $200 \pm$ White Pelicans, two Ring-billed Gulls; 25th, $300 \pm$ White Pelicans; Mountain View marshes, four Long-billed Curlew; 15th, at the two bridges, $500 \pm$ Willets, $100 \pm$ Western Sandpipers, $200 \pm$ Marbled Godwit.

Mrs. Stephens: July 17th, Cliff House, three Murres, four Surf-birds; 31st, Lake Merced, seven adult Western Grebes and one young; August 7th, Cliff House, four Black and one Ruddy Turnstone, North Lake, Golden Gate Park, one each Red and Northern Phalarope.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

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For the Study and the Protection of Birds

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Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 P. M., Room 19, Ferry Building.

Address Bulletin correspondence to Mrs. A. B. Stephens, Editor, 1695 Filbert St., San Francisco.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

Life memberships, \$50.00.

Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.